

Lee vs. Grant

Battlefields and Tourism in Virginia

After being repulsed we build [sic] some breastworks by a creek of water, and stay behind them for a few days, probably to rest. Indeed it is a rest much needed, after more than a month's campaign, which was never equalled in modern times. Not a day in all this time but we have been under fire, most of the time fighting hard battles, and so far have seen nothing but fighting, marching, digging, and burying the dead. Oh, what a bloody trail we have left behind to point out to all future generations the celebrated LINE that we fought on all summer in the year 1864.¹

Written by Sgt. Daniel Crotty of the 3rd Michigan Infantry, these chilling words portray the campaign that began on the fourth day of May 1864, when the Federal army of Ulysses S. Grant crossed the Rapidan River and entered the Wilderness. For two bloody months the opposing armies fought, maneuvered, then fought again as Grant bludgeoned his way toward Richmond. The commander of the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia, Robert E. Lee, boldly countered each of his opponent's moves, inflicting casualties that totaled an unprecedented average of 2,000 per day; numbers that distressed northerners and southerners alike. Place names such as the Wildemess, Spotsylvania, North Anna, Totopotomoy, Cold Harbor, and Petersburg, familiar to few others who lived outside central Virginia, were inducted by blood into the American legacy. This was the first segment of the final Virginia campaign that pitted the two great generals against each other.

The second segment of the campaign began on April 2, 1865, when Lee was left with no other alternative than to abandon his positions around Petersburg and Richmond and attempt a juncture with other Confederate armies operating in North Carolina. This operation, known as "Lee's Retreat," ended six days later when Union cavalry blocked the Confederate escape route west of Farmville. On April 9, the generals met at Appomattox Court House to sign the surrender documents.

In the years following the war, the routes of these campaigns were generally ignored except by campaign historians or accomplished tour guides. Led by the National Park Service (NPS) historians

Ed Bearss, Bob Krick, Chris Calkins, and others, many groups have had the great fortune of traversing Virginia's picturesque byways following the routes of the armies with expert guides. But until recently, the lone Civil War enthusiast was left to his or her own devices to plot the military movements that connected the NPS-owned battlefields and lesser known sites between the Wilderness and Appomattox.

All that has changed forever thanks to an extraordinary partnership between Virginia tourism officials, county administrators, local politicians, private citizens, the Virginia Department of Transportation, and the NPS. This partnership was built on the common purpose of marketing Virginia's unique Civil War resources for economic benefit and creating increased interpretation, preservation, and protection of the lesser known battlefields and significant portions of battlefields adjacent to but not included in the boundaries of the national parks.

This partnership began in 1993, when tourism officials, county administrators, and historians from the City of Petersburg, and the counties of Amelia, Appomattox, Buckingham, Cumberland, Dinwiddie, Nottoway, and Prince Edward explored methods to use the shared history of Lee's Retreat from Petersburg to Appomattox to promote their combined historic and natural resources. Planning sessions involving this diverse association resulted in a driving tour route with interpretive stops at battle sites and other historic resources related to the campaign. This "history lesson on wheels," as praised by one *Washington Post* reporter, had one stumbling block: finding the necessary funding to denote, interpret, and market the tour.

At that point, all eyes turned toward the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA). This highly competitive funding source set aside 10% of each state's highway construction funds to be used for transportation enhancement projects. In Virginia, this amounted to about \$7 million annually for five years.

In 1993, the multi-jurisdictional partnership prepared an ISTEA grant application that resulted



in \$225,000 for the establishment of Lee's Retreat route. This became the first of five phases of the project that would continue through the next four years. Curiously the decision to participate was not unanimous. One of the seven counties vital to the success of the tour dropped out at the last moment, but later reversed that decision as a result of pressure from county residents.

Relying on the knowledge of NPS historians at Petersburg National Battlefield and Appomattox Court House National Historical Park and information in the book *Thirty-Six Hours Before Appomattox*, written by NPS historian Chris Calkins, the partnership selected 20 tour stops. The project called for highway trailblazing signs that identified the 60-mile route. Each stop along the tour was designed to include a large metal map for orientation and an AM radio transmitter that would provide a three-to-five minute interpretive message by tuning the car radio to 1610. NPS historians prepared the narrative to cover the entire Appomattox Campaign; the messages at each site built upon each other to tell the entire story. Some interpretive stops were placed in church and store parking lots; others were constructed on lands where easements were donated to the counties. An engineering firm was contracted to prepare the site designs at each interpretive stop to include parking and landscaping and to oversee the Section 106 compliance process. In 1994, a second ISTEA grant for \$390,000 was awarded for the completion of the project dubbed "Lee's Retreat."

In spring 1995, Lee's Retreat was officially opened in a public ceremony featuring the Governor of Virginia. The press showed a keen interest in the project and immediately a flood of articles appeared in periodicals and newspapers such as *Life Magazine*, *Southern Living*, and *USA Today*. Thousands of inquiries were handled through a 1-800-6-RETREAT number established

at the Petersburg City visitor center. This overwhelming success story prompted federal ISTEA administrators to select Lee's Retreat as one of the top 25 national ISTEA projects in 1996.

Other marketing officials within Virginia watched the power of heritage tourism unfold and decided that the concept of Lee's Retreat could be expanded to other areas of the state. In 1994, officials from 12 jurisdictions between Fredericksburg and Petersburg met to inaugurate a similar project. But the question of commonality proved elusive. In one session NPS historians suggested following the trail known as the "Overland Campaign" that pitted Lee against Grant from the Wilderness to Petersburg. All agreed that the perfect connection existed thematically and physically with Lee's Retreat, and the excitement was overwhelming. Jack Berry, president of the Metro Richmond Convention and Visitors Bureau (MRCVB), equated the rediscovery of this trail that had remained dormant for 130 years with the excitement of "finding the buried Confederate gold."

Using the prospect of ISTEA for the major funding source, tourism officials from central Virginia eagerly went to work scheduling public hearings, a requirement of the ISTEA grant process, and soliciting resolutions from the county boards of supervisors endorsing the project. The NPS historians from Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania NMP, Richmond NBP, and Petersburg NB began plotting the routes used by the armies and in the process identified more than 50 sites worthy of interpretation along the 100-mile trail.

In late 1994, a \$510,000 ISTEA grant was approved for the development of the Lee vs. Grant trail. With funding secured, officials from each of the 12 central Virginia jurisdictions and NPS representatives met monthly and created a working relationship that went beyond jurisdictional boundaries for the good of the entire project. The first challenge was to establish specific goals. They were:

- Develop and package a program that would link the sites of the Overland Campaign in a logical and chronological order;
- Educate visitors through published materials and site interpretation about the historical significance of the events that occurred between May and July 1864 and their military, cultural, and sociological ramifications;
- Double the number of visitors to Civil War sites, using as the benchmark a 1992 statistic that indicated 25% of all visitors to Virginia visited a Civil War site;² and
- Make Civil War history a user-friendly commodity to tourists.

The Widow Tapp Farm, site of the "Lee to the rear" episode that occurred during the Battle of the Wilderness, is included in the Lee vs. Grant trail. Illustration courtesy Don Pierce.



The authors and John Hodges, Planning Director for Hanover County, Virginia, at the Howe's Shop Battlefield, a stop along the trail. Photo courtesy of Don Pierce.

At this early stage, four working committees were established to set time tables and to distribute the tasks equally among the participants. The History Committee, consisting of NPS and local historians, was responsible for writing interpretive text and selecting illustrations for the wayside exhibits. The Marketing Committee was to develop advertisement schedules and place advertisements in leading national journals as determined by marketing research. The Media Committee was to develop press releases. The Operations Committee, headed by Chesterfield County's Deputy Administrator, was to prepare all contracts and serve as the financial agent for the ISTE A grant.

The Lee vs. Grant trail partnership approached interpretation differently than Lee's Retreat. Instead of AM radio transmitters, wayside exhibits were chosen to tell the story. The format was similar to waysides used at NPS sites along the trail. The partnership felt the continuity with interpretive media in NPS areas was extremely important. A full color brochure highlighting the trail and listing each site was prepared, and 100,000 copies were printed.

Chronologically, the Lee vs. Grant campaign began on May 4, 1864, at Germanna Ford, precisely where the Union Army of the Potomac crossed the Rapidan River. Several interpretive exhibits at the crossing site set the stage for the visitor to understand one of the bloodiest periods in American history. Leaving Germanna Ford the trail links several of the campaign's significant battlefields managed by the NPS including the Wilderness (May 5-6), Spotsylvania Court House (May 8-19), Cold Harbor (May 31-June 12) and Petersburg (June 15). Hanover County administers public parks at the North Anna (May 23-26) and Cold Harbor battlefield sites.

Churches served as popular resting points for the armies, and the trail includes several that still exist. Timothy O'Sullivan photographed Grant and his commanders at Massaponax Church. With a little imagination, the scene can easily be recreated. Active congregations still meet regularly at Bethel and Mount Carmel churches in Caroline County, and Salem and Enon churches in Hanover County.

Perhaps the trail's most compelling feature involves following wartime roads used by the armies. Three especially evocative sections include the Brock Road (State Route 613) connecting the



Wilderness and Spotsylvania battlefields, State Route 607 that traces the Union army's march past several surviving antebellum homes, and State Route 615 between King William and Hanover counties where 30,000 Federal soldiers crossed the Pamunkey River. These roads allow the traveler to "step back in time" and experience the same views as the soldier of 1864 since the rural character of these narrow winding byways remains largely intact.

Waterways also exerted tremendous influence on the movements of armies. Three vital river crossings for the Union army are located along the route—Nelson's Crossing on the Pamunkey, Long Bridge on the Chickahominy, and both Wilcox's Landing and Flowerdew Hundred on the James.

No appreciation for the immense logistical problems faced by the armies can be complete without an understanding of railroads. Evidence of Virginia's railroad heritage can be seen repeatedly along the trail. Landmarks include remains of the Potomac Creek rail bridge; Hanover Junction, where the old Virginia Central and the Richmond, Fredericksburg & Potomac crossed lines; and Southside Station, the oldest remaining rail station in Virginia.

The partnership was careful to ensure that the Lee vs. Grant trail included more than battlefields. Museums and related sites can be reached in Fredericksburg, Ashland, Richmond, Hopewell, and Petersburg. Tour stops in Chesterfield and Henrico counties include forts and historic homes.

Following the establishment of the Lee vs. Grant trail, several counties requested that additional publicly and privately owned sites be included along the route. A second ISTE A request for \$580,000 was successfully submitted in 1995 to complete the project. In the spring of 1996, the trailblazers were placed along the roadways and the trail was officially dedicated. Interpretive signs were written early this year, and production is now

underway. The trail will soon be ready for its first season of visitors.

The immediate success of the Lee's Retreat and Lee vs. Grant trails prompted other sections of the state to consider ways to participate in this heritage tourism initiative. In a statewide meeting organized by the MRCVB, the now greatly expanded partnership decided to unite all existing or planned Civil War related trails in the state under one heading, Virginia Civil War Trails, and to create a 1-888-Civil War number that would be used on all national and international marketing pieces. They also decided to attempt a fifth ISTE A grant in 1996—the last year of the guaranteed funding for the ISTE A program—to fund the establishment of trails throughout the state. This request was approved for \$550,000 and will support the development of a trail along the route of the 1862 Peninsula Campaign in Tidewater Virginia, a trail in northern Virginia, and several trails in the Shenandoah Valley.

Key to the success of this trails program was publicity. The Civil War Trails marketing committee had established an impressive game plan. Paid advertisements in numerous publications such as *Reader's Digest*, *Southern Living*, and the *Wall Street Journal Travel Planner* generated 19,782 reader inquiries during the first six months of 1996. The Virginia Tourism Corporation, a significant partner in the process, also agreed to dedicate a portion of their World Wide Web page to information about the trails project at <<http://www.VIRGINIA.org>>.

Each of the partners, now more than 62 jurisdictions, is keenly interested in measuring the success of the Commonwealth's Civil War Trails. Success will take several forms. There is no question that media attention to the trail system has been extremely positive in creating a profound awareness across the nation. Awareness is more difficult to quantify or assess, but will hopefully lead to greater use and appreciation. Road counters have been established at various stops along Lee's Retreat and preliminary numbers suggest that more than 600 visitors stop at the remote waysides each month. An economic impact study for Lee's Retreat will be completed this spring.

In Amelia County, there is a growing appreciation for the unchanged rural character of the route and a growing effort to preserve that character. Among the rural counties there is an emerging excitement about sharing their heritage with outsiders. For many regions of Virginia, organized heritage activities did not exist before the establishment of the trails. Now visitors from throughout America and the world are reading about, touring, and appreciating what Virginia has to offer.

Evidence exists that the Virginia Civil War trails project is becoming a catalyst for historic preservation activities around the state. Two historic homes in Tidewater that served as hospital and headquarters sites during the campaign are being preserved and interpreted at great expense and will be included on the trail. On the James River, the City of Hopewell is in the process of developing a walking trail within its historic district that will augment the information provided to visitors along the Lee vs. Grant route. Even in northern Virginia, where little open space exists, emphasis has been placed on preserving resources that will become candidates for future trail stops.

This successful partnership was built on a foundation of trust, common purposes, and shared values. The success of this heritage tourism initiative has united the powerful forces of tourism with conservation and created two winners: the American legacy and the Virginia visitor.

Notes

¹ Daniel G. Crotty, *Four Years Campaigning In The Army of the Potomac* (New Jersey: Belle Grove Publishing Co., 1995), 138.

² Virginia Tourism Corporation, 1992.

David Ruth is currently the Acting Superintendent of Richmond National Battlefield Park and the Maggie L. Walker National Historic Site. Mike Andrus is currently the Acting Chief of Interpretation and Cultural Resources Management at Richmond National Battlefield Park and the Maggie L. Walker National Historic Site. Both Dave and Mike have served on the executive committee of the central Virginia ISTE A partnership since its inception.